Women Claiming Space in Mosques

A subject that has largely been overlooked until recently and whose implications for the various fields of Islamic studies are wide-ranging, is female mosque attendance and the corresponding spatial and tenacious core of devotees, a small group. Henceforth the term Ibadou is widely used to designate those who veil, wear a headscarf, and pray with their arms crossed. As one Ibadou informant put it, ‘people are hungry for the truth’ and the mosque becomes the ideal locus to convey this message. In order to fulfill this mission, the mosque must open its doors to women as well as men.

Les filles voilées

Reformist Islam is not new to Senegal, yet it has only been in the last fifteen years that such straits have had an explicit and very tangible influence on women. The most obvious markers of this shift in religious orientation are undoubtedly the hijab and frequenting the mosque, both of which are in breach of local interpretations of what a Muslim woman should or should not do. In stead of following one particular school of though, the Ibadou claim to follow all four Sunni schools of law. Female Sunni informants, known as les filles voilées, would quote a number of hadiths to support women’s presence in the mosque and would admit that often the mosque was the place where they learned such hadiths. Most of the respondents to my questionnaires were Muslim students with some proficiency in French. Most had started to wear the hijab and frequent the mosque in their early twenties, in the mid-1990s.

Some of the first women to veil did so under the influence of the Jamaatou Ibadou Rahiame. The style of the veil has distinct Middle Eastern origins, pinned or sewn under the chin, often trimmed with lace and rarely going below the bosom. Colours are varied and match with brightly coloured clothes and extendible petty-coats, used to cover feet during prayer. By contrast, the newly emerging reformist movement is introducing more sober colours and styles, including the dark, opaque chador-like garment and the use of socks. The most eloquent proof of the growing number of Ibadou-Ibadou is reflected in the University of Dakar. In the university’s mosque, during peak times, especially Friday prayers, few of the dark hijabs remain. Their wearers frequent a reformist mosque, more in keeping with their attitude, where the segregation of the imam in their own language rather than in Arabic, is the practice in the majority of mosques affiliated to a tariqa.

Women’s space

The metaphor of opening the doors to women has a literal manifestation as well. In many of the so-called Ibadou mosques, on Fridays, when there is an overflow of worshipers, the back door is left open so that women praying outside can still participate visually in the ceremony. Sometimes this technique is also used to accommodate women during their monthly periods when they cannot enter the mosque. This simple measure ensures that they can continue with their religious classes on tariqah or haddi while not being able to take up their usual space for the five daily prayers directly before the men.

Another way of accommodating women below the age of menopause is to allow small children into the mosque. In one mosque, on Tuesday afternoons women from all parts of Dakar and from different social backgrounds meet to be taught Arabic, hadith, and the Qur’an as well as general knowledge. They bring their children and sit outside as described above when they are ritually unclean. This little prayer room for women situated in the courtyard of the men’s mosque has been renamed Mosque Aisha. The congregations of the name are twofold: one refers to the historical figure of Aisha, reputed to have been a lady of learning, and the other makes a clear reference to the Sunnis/Ibadou orientation of the establishment.

One of the most significant examples of the transformation of mosque space into a women’s area is in Cité Soprin, also in the outskirts of Dakar. Here the former women’s prayer room adjacent to the mosque proper has been knocked down and redesigned by a female architect, also an Ibadou. The new women’s space includes a wide window to allow the women to participate visually in the Friday prayer. Senegalese mosques usually comprise no more than one floor. Cité Soprin is a new mosque on the south side of the island of Saint Louis, Mosquée Ihsan. In both these cases architectural innovation has served to accommodate the women on the upper storey but this idea was later abandoned for logistical reasons. Firmly entrenched in the Tijani tradition, Mosquée Ihsan controversially accommodates women in the gallery above the courtyard.

Today, not only are more women fre-quenting the mosque, their very presence in the mosque embodies the notion of appropriation. Spatially, appropriation is reflected in the varying degrees to which women have gained either physical or visual access to what was previously out of bounds for them in the men’s part of the mosque. In terms of generation, younger women have often gone to considerable lengths to don the hijab and frequent the mosque regularly, in breach of local custom, which discourages and even threatens them. Islamic dress codes as a means to access public prayer places and signifies a greater acquaintance with their religious rights and duties. Simi-larly, degrees of covering point to varying doctrinal orientations and serve as identity markers.

Notes
3. See also research by Olga F. Linares, which reveals the same attitude towards women: Power, Prayer and Production: The Julie of Conakry, Senegal (1992), 173.

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